

India and Pakistan teeter on the precipice of war

By Keith Jones
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Four days after India's government, without so much as even a cursory investigation, held Pakistan responsible for a terrorist attack on the Uri military base in the disputed Kashmir region that killed 18 Indian soldiers, New Delhi continues to be gripped by war fever.

From the political establishment, military, and corporate media has come a clamour for India to "punish" Pakistan. The media has enthusiastically reported that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is conferring with the military and intelligence chiefs about possible air and cruise missile strikes. Cross-border raids and the assassination of those responsible for the Uri attacks through covert action are also said to be under consideration.

Yesterday, India charged that Pakistani troops had unleashed a cross-border artillery barrage, violating the shaky ceasefire across the Line of Control (LoC) that divides Indian- and Pakistani-held Kashmir. By late afternoon, New Delhi was boasting it had killed 10 armed militants whom it said had recently infiltrated the LoC near Uri.

Such reports, and indeed all the claims and counter-claims of the Indian and Pakistani governments and their militaries should be viewed critically. India's military has a long and well-documented history of fake encounter killings in Kashmir; just as Pakistan's military-intelligence apparatus has a proven record of using Islamist terrorists to pursue its reactionary strategic conflict with India and to manipulate, communalize, and suppress the popular opposition of the Kashmiri people to the Indian state.

Amid the Indian elite's clamour for dispensing with "strategic restraint" and delivering a harsh, demonstrable blow to Pakistan, some voices can now be heard, not least from elements within the Indian military, urging New Delhi to thoroughly deliberate over its battle plan before proceeding.

Far from being advocates of peace, those counselling caution are merely making the obvious, albeit chilling, point that a military strike on Pakistan could quickly spiral into an all-out war and with a nuclear-armed adversary. An adversary, moreover, that has publicly stated the massive strategic imbalance between it and India has compelled it to deploy "battlefield," or tactical nuclear weapons, and signalled that they will be used if Indian forces launch or, in the midst of a war, mass for an invasion of Pakistan.

"We will avenge the killings of our soldiers," an unnamed top military commander told the *Indian Express*. "But we will do so based on cold-blooded professional military assessment, and a timeline of our own choosing, not one dictated by political

imperative or the prime-time news cycle."

Yesterday, the *Express* and other influential Indian dailies reported that senior military commanders had told the government a "swift" strike on Pakistan may not be "feasible" because Pakistan has mobilized forces near the LoC in readiness and because Indian forces are not yet positioned to thwart the inevitable Pakistani counter-strike.

Such reports could well be disinformation. In the run-up to the May 2014 election that brought him to power, Modi pilloried the previous Congress Party-led government for its supposed "appeasement" of Pakistan. Leaders of his Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its close ally, the fascistic RSS, have been leading the outcry for swift and decisive action against Pakistan.

But insofar as there is truth to the claim, India has decided not to immediately take the most incendiary actions—a high-profile cross-border attack or airplane and missile strikes—pressure from Washington is undoubtedly also a motivating factor.

Washington has deplored the Uri attack and reaffirmed its partnership with India. But it has not joined New Delhi in labelling Pakistan responsible for Sunday's assault. In summarizing the outcome of US Secretary of State John Kerry's Monday meeting with Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, a State Department spokesman said that Kerry had insisted on the need for India and Pakistan to work together to reduce tensions. He added that Kerry had praised Pakistan's contribution to the fight against "terrorism," while repeating the US's standard call for Pakistan to do more to stop its territory from being used as a "safe haven" by terrorists.

With the aim of harnessing India to its drive to strategically isolate, encircle, and prepare for war with China, the US under George W. Bush and now Obama has forged a "global strategic partnership" with India and lavished it with strategic favours, including access to the Pentagon's most advanced technology.

Pakistan has warned in ever more shrill language that the Indo-US alliance has overturned the balance of power in South Asia, emboldening India and triggering a weapons and nuclear arms race. But all to no avail. The strategists of US imperialism view India as the crucial south-western pillar of a quadrilateral anti-China alliance, involving its principal Asian-Pacific allies, Japan and Australia.

However, Washington, in keeping with the imperialist patron-client character of its relationship with India and to the

consternation of the Indian elite, has repeatedly shown that it is not ready to cede New Delhi a “free hand” in dealing with Pakistan. US strategists are well aware that the Indo-Pakistani conflict could rapidly escalate to war with potentially incalculable consequences for the people of South Asia, and more importantly, from their view, US hegemony over Eurasia. Even heightened tensions between New Delhi and Islamabad cut across the US war in Afghanistan, which remains almost wholly dependent on Pakistan for logistical support.

However, none of this should be interpreted to mean that South Asia is anything but teetering on the precipice of war.

The rival ruling elites of India and Pakistan are primed to dangerously escalate their confrontation in the coming days and weeks. Moreover, the US’s reckless drive for global hegemony, which has already blown up the Middle East and brought the world closer to a clash of the great powers than any time since the Second World War, has now sucked South Asia into the maelstrom of imperialist violence and war—adding a highly combustible explosive charge to all the region’s conflicts, most importantly those between India and Pakistan and India and China.

Even the more “measured” steps India will reportedly take, should it deem an immediate strike on Pakistan too hazardous, would dramatically escalate tensions and propel India and Pakistan toward a clash. The difference between the two options is at most that between lighting a long or a short fuse to war.

According to the press reports, the “measured” steps include:

- Sustained (i.e. weeks or months) of artillery barrages across the LoC to make the Pakistani military “bleed.”

- Small cross-border raids into Pakistan to kill Kashmiri insurgents and Pakistani troops, but that will be publicly touted as encounters on Indian soil. (According to an article in yesterday’s *Indian Express*, the Indian military used this tactic during the undeclared 1999 Kargil War, seizing and executing seven Pakistani soldiers.)

- Expanding India’s military-strategic involvement in Afghanistan, with the aim of countering Pakistan’s influence and placing pressure on it from the north and west. (Pakistan has repeatedly charged that India’s intelligence agency, RAW, is already using Afghanistan to provide support to both nationalist insurgents in Balochistan and to the Pakistan Taliban.)

- Intensifying India’s recently-launched strategic offensive to leverage the Balochistan issue, that is the Balochi nationalist opposition to the Pakistani state in its resource rich, western-most province.

Rattled by the mass protests in Kashmir—protests the BJP government has dismissed as the product of nothing more than the machinations of “Pakistani “terrorists”—Modi last month launched a major strategic turn, announcing that henceforth India will denounce Islamabad’s brutal repression in Balochistan at the UN and other international forums. So as to underscore the implicit

threat of Indian support for Pakistan’s dismemberment, New Delhi has also indicated that it intends to give more “political space” to the Balochi separatists in India.

This strategy would appear to be the brainchild of Modi’s national security adviser, Ajit Doval, who in advocating a more aggressive policy against Pakistan in a February 2014 speech declared, “You do one more Mumbai (a reference to the 2008 Mumbai terror attack), and you lose Balochistan.”

While directed first and foremost against Islamabad, India’s new Balochistan policy also targets Beijing. In response to India’s burgeoning strategic partnership with the US, China has moved over the past year and a half to enhance its longstanding “all weather friendship” with Pakistan.

China is investing \$46 billion in Pakistan to build a transit and pipeline corridor stretching from western China to the Arabian Sea Port of Gwadar, in south-western Balochistan. India virulently opposes the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) because it provides a desperately needed shot in the arm to Pakistan’s economy. But it is also well aware that the CPEC has major strategic implications for China. Were the CPEC to be completed, it would enable Beijing to partially counter US plans to impose an economic blockade on China in the event of a war or war crisis by seizing Indian Ocean and South China Sea “chokepoints.”

While Washington may today seek to dampen India-Pakistan tensions because they cut across its own predatory designs, its drive to make India a “frontline” state in its anti-China military-strategic offensive is a hugely destabilizing factor and is whetting New Delhi’s own reactionary great power ambitions. The logic of the US’s actions is to polarize the region, dramatically raising the likelihood that a war between India and Pakistan would draw in other great powers, starting with the US and China.

All sections of the Indian and Pakistani bourgeoisie and their political representatives are deeply implicated in the Indo-Pakistani conflict. This is true of the Stalinists of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the older, smaller Communist Party of India. The Stalinists have supported the vast expansion of India’s military over the past two decades and repeatedly propped up Indian governments that pursued closer ties to Washington, including the Congress-led government that forged India’s “partnership” with US imperialism.

The explosive developments of the past three days underscore the urgency of building a working class-led movement against war and imperialism in South Asia, as part of a global anti-war mobilization animated by the program of socialist internationalism.

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